

← A note on teaching with the Brakhage DVD

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← This past fall quarter I assigned the BY BRAKHAGE DVD as a required text in my intro survey experimental film course at Northwestern, which enrolled 33 students. (The other required texts were Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 3rd ed, and A. L. Rees; grad students did additional reading of David James *Allegories of Cinema*, and a book of their choice from a suggested list).

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← I was eager to see if actually being able to do a close study of extremely complex experimental films using the DVD would improve the students' abilities to analyze these films. As many teacher's know, experimental film courses must often be taught so that students get to see films only once, and this severely limits how much they may retain of the experience. Even in situations where I am able to screen a film, have a discussion, and then screen it again, if renting it, I am not able to show it again later in the course, unless my department owns a print, and we have very few experimental films in our collection.

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← The first day, the first film I screened (as usual) was *Mothlight*. The second class meeting I screened *Window Water Baby Moving* twice. When a film I had planned for the midterm was suddenly unavailable, I substituted *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* from the DVD (Students had a choice of writing on it, or another short lyrical film; each film was shown twice).

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← Later in the quarter, I screened

← Brakhage, *Sirius Remembered* (on video) and as films *Arabic 6*, and *The Lion and the Zebra Make God's Jewels*, and *Murder Psalm*

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← In addition to the parts in Sitney and Rees on Brakhage, the students had Fred Camper's notes for the DVD, and I also had them read two essays on Brakhage by Paul Arthur (the links are at Camper's website), the chapter "The Untutored Eye" from William Wees, *Light Moving in Time*, and Marjorie Keller's essay in *Film Quarterly* on *Murder Psalm*. I also gave them a short essay by me introducing Brakhage.

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← Near the end of the course, all the students had to write a report of 500-750 words on one of the films on the DVD, and post it on the Blackboard site for the course (an online teaching resource accessible only to class members) , so they all shared this exercise.

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← Students had a take-home final with two parts. The first part required:

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← Choose one question from Group A and write a concise essay of 1000-1200 words. It is important to think about the question in advance and draw on course screenings, readings, lectures and discussions and come up with a synthesis.

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← **GROUP A**

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← 1. Present your analysis of *Dog Star Man*. You should draw on your knowledge of Brakhage and the critical discussion of his work, in particular Sitney's presentation of the film and the maker.

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← 2. How can we understand, experience, and appreciate Brakhage's abstract works? Work from a close analysis of one film on the DVD to discuss the aesthetics of non-figurative moving image materials.

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← 3. Light, one of the materials and foundations of film art, is not just a subordinate feature for Brakhage but a central issue fusing form and content, style and theme, vision and the materiality of recording and projecting film. Discuss with relation to one or two specific films on the DVD.

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← 4. Keller's essay on *Murder Psalm* explicitly defends Brakhage from charges that his work is not politically/socially relevant. Discuss how she makes her case and compare or contrast it with a different film on the DVD.

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← I was very impressed with the overall quality of the students' answers to this part of the exam. Most of them chose to write on "light" and few chose Dog Star Man or the question of abstraction. (But these are film students for the most part, familiar with writing on figurative and representational work, rather than art history or art theory students, say, who might have experienced writing about abstract art.) Certainly the opportunity to view and re-view, examine individual frames and observe editing in detail made a big difference.

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← In the course evaluations, the students did not remark on gaining a new level of skill in close analysis of experimental work, but I observed it. A few students did remark that they didn't like Brakhage's work. I'd certainly assign the DVD again, but I'd also hope that more DVDs of experimental work are produced with this level of quality, so I'd have other choices for this and other courses.

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